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**THE CORDS PACIFICATION PROGRAM:
AN OPERATIONAL LEVEL CAMPAIGN PLAN IN
LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT**

A Monograph

by

Major Richard J. Macak, Jr.

United States Marine Corps



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ABSTRACT

THE CORDS PACIFICATION PROGRAM: AN OPERATIONAL LEVEL CAMPAIGN PLAN IN LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT by MAJ Richard J. Macak, Jr., USMC, 44 pages.

The purpose of this monograph is to evaluate the Civil Operations, Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program determining whether it represents a viable operational approach to counterinsurgency warfare. The study specifically seeks to understand whether the counter-insurgency concepts espoused by the CORDS program contained major operations which were sequenced combining tactical means to achieve political ends.

The study begins with a brief overview of today's political realities influencing U.S. responses in the Third World. Next, it examines the CORDS program's historical development, organization, and implementation. The monograph concludes by finding several operational characteristics in the program's approach to the counter-insurgency it conducted in Vietnam between 1967 and 1972. These operational issues include: (a) the presence of an operational leader in the form of Ambassador Komer; (b) an operational planning process that balanced ends, ways, means and risk; and (c) an operationally executed campaign that sequenced its major operations.

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The CORDS Pacification Program:
An Operational Level Campaign Plan
in Low Intensity Conflict

I. Introduction

For the foreseeable future, the U.S. must remain ready to confront not only the conventional military challenges inherent in areas such as the European Central front but also those diverse, unconventional problems associated with some Third World countries. Yet, if world events since World War II accurately portend future trends, then the probability for the occurrence of an impending global nuclear or conventional conflict will likely remain low. Moreover, recent U.S. and Soviet arms reduction talks, while not conclusive at this time, create a perception, at least, of lessening super-power tensions in the nuclear and conventional arenas. At the same time, however, a form of super-power confrontation within the Third World has been ongoing since World War II as some emerging yet woefully underdeveloped countries have become stages for wars of national liberation.

Ironically, while the U.S. concentrated its defensive efforts to defeat the conventional threat, the menace to American economic and security interests in the oftentimes unstable Third World was practically ignored. Although foreign assistance programs to the Third World

can, to some degree, ameliorate the various social, economic, political and internal stability problems, individual frustrations with the government's progress can sometimes lead to future efforts to disrupt those governments. Thus, the U.S. must be prepared to act within the Third World to protect national interests should future insurgencies demand such a response.

Since insurgencies have enjoyed much success in the post-war era, the U.S. should develop and employ an operational level counterinsurgency concept to deal with this current and future threat. Only by understanding the link between tactical gains--obtained either through violent or non-violent means--and strategic objectives can we construct a viable campaign plan. Fortunately for the U.S., a body of doctrine developed and employed during the Vietnam conflict exists as a possible guide for future U.S. actions in the Third World.

The Civil Operations, Revolutionary Development Support program (CORDS), as practiced in Vietnam between 1968 and 1972, appears to represent just this kind of approach in counter-insurgency warfare. This program brought all U.S. national assets under one agency for command and control purposes, eliminating wasted effort in the pacification actions. This unified undertaking consolidated all local successes into a major cumulative effect, which seems to define the operational level of

war in a counterinsurgency. Thus, this monograph asks whether the CORDS program represents such an operational approach to counterinsurgency warfare. In other words, was there a sequencing of major operations comprised of tactical actions employing both violent and nonviolent means to achieve the political end state?

To answer this question, this monograph first briefly overviews today's political realities constraining and defining U.S. responses in the Third World. Next, the study examines the CORDS historical development, organization, and implementation. Finally, the study compares the CORDS program with several issues relating to operational art.

II. Political Realities

To begin this study, a brief overview of the political realities confronting U.S. policymakers is presented to identify the context that will define future actions in the Third World. First, we all recognize the threat posed by some emerging Third World countries because of their almost insurmountable domestic problems. Not surprisingly, the Third World has occupied much of our attention in the recent past. A quotation from the final draft of a report by the Regional Conflict Working Group of the Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy confirms this point:

Nearly all the armed conflicts of the past forty years have occurred in what is vaguely referred to as the Third World: the diverse countries of Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and the Eastern Caribbean. In the same period, all wars in which the United States was involved--either directly or indirectly with its combat forces or indirectly with various forms of military assistance--were in the Third World.¹

The report's assessment calling for future U.S. involvement in this part of the world is not surprising.

Through the turn of the century and beyond, long-standing national interests will remain: maintaining the security of our nation and our allies; responding to the challenges of the global economy; defending and advancing the cause of democracy, freedom and human rights; resolving disputes peacefully; and building effective relationships among nations.²

Furthermore, it states that the "challenges to achieving such goals in the Third World are likely to be formidable" because the "underlying tensions [are] likely to remain unresolved" and "weapons available will almost certainly be more numerous and more destructive."³

More importantly, because of mass communications and interdependent economic systems, these unresolved tensions could lead to regional disputes having worldwide implications. A regional conflict could, for example, lead to an interruption of access to vital resources, a loss of U.S. military basing rights, a threat to lines of communication, and expanded opportunities for Soviet political and military gains. In short, the future seems reasonably clear on at least one point: our involvement

in future Third World disputes will likely continue since a strategic withdrawal is not an option for a world power such as the U.S.⁵

The second political factor is the, fragile at best, bipartisan political consensus regarding U.S. participation in Third World conflicts. Recent debate on this participation has been emotionally charged and divisive. From this debate two widely divergent political stances have been produced regarding U.S. intervention. One group argues that the U.S. has "no right or obligation to influence events in the Third World with any military means, and no capacity to change the course of history...." Conversely, the other group views the Third World as the test of strength between East and West and desires "to contest with all means" any Soviet adventures in the Third World. While the majority favors neither of these views, a strong public consensus on future U.S. actions in the Third World is currently lacking.⁶

Recognizing this lack of any domestic political mandate, the Regional Working Group has recommended a "strategy of selective involvement." This calls upon the U.S. to "be prepared when its own key interests are engaged to strengthen allies and friends in the Third World against external and internal threats, and thus to help defend governments undertaking political, economic,

or social reforms which will ameliorate the root causes of instability or basic vulnerabilities." Basically, this selective involvement advocates a variety of tactical responses employing both violent and nonviolent means. The violent acts apply to the security forces and their efforts creating the shield behind which the nonviolent pacification actions can take effect.⁷

The last political reality worthy of note relates to the nature of our potential adversary, his strategy, and the implications that strategy has on the nature of war. Because of the success some of these movements have enjoyed in the recent past, future insurgencies may employ revolutionary warfare concepts originally developed by Mao Tse Tung and later modified by Vo Nguyen Giap which advocate a phased approach to revolutionary warfare. The insurgent's agenda, according to Douglas Pike, author of PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam, combines both a political and military approach into one strategy which Mr. Pike refers to as dau tranh. This strategy calls for an extensive commitment of time, energy, and resources.

In describing the dau tranh strategy's effect on the nature of war, Mr. Pike notes that "a unique strategy was being used that blended military, political, social, psychological, and communicational factors. That strategy dictated a non-military response. A paradox

existed. It was possible to lose the war by losing battles, but winning the battles did not mean victory. Therefore, while the traditional definition of "defeat" in war remained valid, the traditional definition of "victory" did not.⁹

In summation, these existing factors have led us to the following conclusions:

1. The U.S. will remain for the foreseeable future involved in the Third World not withdrawing into some sort of strategic isolation.

2. If committed into a Third World regional conflict, the U.S. should employ both violent and nonviolent actions by initially providing local security to foster subsequent pacification efforts.

3. Future insurgencies may adopt a strategy containing a military and political component which will require a similarly constructed U.S. counter-strategy if we are to have any hope at all of protecting our national interests and maintaining regional stability throughout the Third World.

III. The CORDS Program

Within this political context then, does the CORDS program's approach appear as an operational level solution against today's insurgent? To determine this answer, we now turn to the CORDS program examining its

historical development, organization and implementation.

During the 1954 Geneva Conference, at the outset of the U.S. involvement in South Vietnam, American objectives in that country were (a) security from Communist encroachment, (b) economic growth, and (c) the advancement of democratic political institutions. To attain those foreign policy goals, the U.S. employed approximate 700 men in a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), the U.S. Overseas Mission (USOM), and the U.S. Information Service (USIS). The MAAG's role was purely conventional, advising the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) how to repel a ground invasion from the north. The two civilian agencies were responsible for economic planning, controlling aid programs, and promoting free political institutions within the Government of Viet Nam (GVN).⁹

By 1957 a serious challenge to the GVN arose in the form of a guerrilla army of former Viet Minh members, now called the Viet Cong. A governmental infrastructure competed with the GVN for the allegiance of the rural population. This Viet Cong infrastructure (VCI) recruited peasants for its army, collected taxes, and undermined GVN influence by intimidating local officials.¹⁰

The GVN's initial attempts to counter this Communist influence in the countryside were the agroville and

strategic hamlet programs. The agrovillage program failed because it removed the peasants from their ancestral lands arousing bitter resentment against the GVN. Likewise, the strategic hamlet program, while not requiring any population shift, neglected to isolate the population from the Viet Cong, and it also failed.

Between 1962 and 1964 the VCI continued to expand to a point where USOM and USIS personnel became increasingly frustrated in their attempts to travel from urban to rural areas. This U.S. advisory presence in the countryside was vitally important to the GVN cause because the French colonial system neglected to produce a body of efficient Vietnamese administrators."

In 1965, because of the Viet Cong's steady and increasing success in the countryside, the North Vietnamese decided to advance into the last phase of their three-phased war. Thus, early in the year the Viet Cong, reinforced by regular North Vietnamese units, began destroying nearly an ARVN battalion per week. In addition, some GVN province and district capitals were temporarily held by the Communists in the Delta and Central Highlands. Furthermore, the North Vietnamese planned a conventional ground attack from the Highlands to the sea to split South Vietnam and isolate Saigon. To counter this threat, President Lyndon Johnson committed large numbers of U.S. ground forces at first to secure

American installations and later to conventionally combat sizeable Communist forces. Although this U.S. conventional effort ultimately pushed the Communists back into phase two, the pacification effort was in dire need of U.S. and GVN attention.¹²

With a conventional military defeat avoided and realizing the importance of a credible pacification effort, the Johnson Administration turned its attention to the "other war", as pacification was sometimes referred to. Responding to domestic criticism regarding the need to emphasize non-military programs, the President quickened the pace in Washington and Saigon. Consequently, pacification was the main topic of discussion at the February 1966 Honolulu Conference receiving renewed interest and an upgraded priority.¹³

Following the conference, the President directed organizational changes in both Washington and Saigon to streamline the pacification effort. It had become apparent to him that:

Each agency had its own ideas on what had to be done, its own communications channels with Washington, its own personnel and administrative structure--and starting in 1964-65, each agency began to have its own field personnel operating under separate and parallel chains of command. This latter event was ultimately to prove the one which gave reorganization efforts such force, since it began to become clear to people in Washington and Saigon alike that the Americans in the provinces were not always working on the same team, and that they were receiving conflicting

and overlapping instructions from a variety of sources in Saigon and Washington.⁴

Furthermore, it had become increasingly clear that the U.S. embassy had become too remote from the province and district capitals. Clearly, changes were needed to rejuvenate the pacification program. Thus, on 28 March 1966, the President responded by appointing Robert Komer as his Special Assistant to act as the "specific focal point for the direction, coordination, and supervision in Washington of U.S. non-military programs relating to Vietnam."⁵

Later that year in November and continuing through the following May the President's impetus for reform reached Saigon where a reorganization occurred unifying the pacification effort in South Vietnam. The transition actually transpired in two stages with the initial organization designated the Office of Civilian Operations (OCO). This new entity received control of all civilian agencies' field offices throughout the country. Financial and other administrative services continued as the responsibility of each agency, whereas operations themselves were directed and controlled by OCO. Similar reorganizations occurred in each of the regions and provinces. The final stage of the reorganization combined the OCO with the military's Revolutionary Development Support Directorate which consolidated all

military and civilian pacification efforts. Thus, the merging of both civilian and military organizations on 11 May 1967 produced the CORDS program. CORDS was then placed under General William C. Westmoreland's Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) control because, as Mr. Komer stated, "let's face another fact: the military are far better to organize, manage, and execute major field programs under chaotic wartime conditions than are civilian agencies, by and large." Therefore, in two short phases, the U.S. restructured its pacification effort bringing all agencies under the control of one headquarters. Subsequently, on 28 May 1967, the President completed the reorganization by directing Mr. Komer to relinquish his Washington duties and assume leadership of CORDS, an organization which he had helped create and one with which he had become very familiar.¹³

Although some civilians feared a military takeover of the pacification effort, just the opposite occurred. In actuality, the CORDS program created a hybrid organization "retaining civilian attributes and control within the military structure which [it] used for its own purposes without being swallowed up." In addition, Mr. Komer was granted four star ambassadorial rank as the Deputy for CORDS (DEPCORDS) reporting directly to General Westmoreland and thereby solidifying his status and leadership position. Thus, after a very lengthy process

stretching from the 1950s to 1967, the U.S. finally created an organization that reflected the executive and legislative branch's renewed interest in pacification.¹⁷

With this brief introduction covering the program's historical development, we can now look at how the U.S. "organized, managed and implemented an effort to induce the Vietnamese to do the right amounts of the right kinds of things so as to secure the countryside and gain the willing support of the rural population."¹⁸ The following examination will also shed some light on how an effective leadership guided this new organization through its crucial formulative period.

Ambassador Komer's directive charged him "with supervising the formation and execution of all plans, policies and programs, military and civilian, which support the [GVN's] Revolutionary Development program and related programs." The directive's rather unlimited and vague charter appeared well suited to the new ambassador's aggressive and outgoing character.¹⁹ Ambassador Komer's forceful personality exploited this charter to its extremes, essentially expanding his control wherever and whenever possible. His disregard for entrenched bureaucratic protocol coupled with his "single mindedness of purpose" placed him immediately at odds with the American "establishment" in South Vietnam. As one of his critics stated:

When Komer's appointment as the Director of CORDS was announced by the White House in May 1967, a cold chill went down the collective bureaucratic spine in Vietnam." Komer, nicknamed "Blowtorch" by Henry Cabot Lodge, is an abrasive, impatient, no-nonsense man."

Accordingly, Ambassador Komer possessed just the qualities needed to quickly implement the President's pacification policy. His organization would reflect an innovative structure combining the efforts from both the civilian and military communities.

In the ambassador's eyes, a unified civilian military advisory network linking the national level with the regions, provinces, and districts was the optimum solution. The organization shown at Appendix A was unique in U.S. history. Never before had a U.S. ambassador served directly under a military command and at the same time exercised command responsibility for military and civilian resources and personnel. Within each echelon the staffs were mixed with either a civilian or military officer in charge who, in turn, was assisted by a second in command who was of the other type. For instance, in the four regions throughout South Vietnam, the senior CORDS official (normally assigned the rank of FSO-1 and equivalent to a major general) was a civilian who was the deputy to the corps commander. On the other hand, province level senior advisors could be either civilians or military personnel since these advisors

directed both military and civilian-oriented programs. At the district level the senior advisor assignments tended toward military officers with about 20% of these billets going to civilians. Thus, as one descended the CORDS organization, the civilians dominated the higher echelons while military officers dominated in the lower levels. Nevertheless, their counterparts were from the opposite camp providing symmetry to the leadership team at each level. All in all, the CORDS program was represented in each of the four regions, 44 provinces, and 234 districts while implementing pacification efforts in over 10,000 hamlets.¹¹

The pacification programs now organized under the CORDS umbrella were extensive and impressive. The following list identifies the specific programs and the agencies that formerly guided them:

New Life Development. A program supported by AID which was organized to rejuvenate the rural economy, improve farm incomes, institute land reform, distribute the Miracle Rice (IR-8) and educate farmers on its use, build roads, open market places and reestablish local GVN government in the villages and hamlets.

Chieu Hoi. Another program supported by AID that attempted to induce defectors from the Viet Cong. Between May 1967 and November 1968 a total of 14,371 enemy troops or sympathizers shifted their loyalties to the GVN. Since the program's inception in 1963 over 90,000 individuals had reportedly taken advantage of this program.

Revolutionary Development Cadre. This was originally a CIA sponsored program that was meant to pacify and establish security in the

rural areas. It employed various teams which were assigned to villages and hamlets in their home districts. Its major task was census taking, resolving grievances and reducing VCI influence in their areas.

Regional and Popular Forces (RF/PF).

Originally under MACV control, these forces were assigned to the provinces, districts and villages to establish security and reduce VCI presence. Totaling over 260,000 personnel, they were key players in the pacification effort allowing the quality of life improvements to take place in the countryside unhindered by the enemy.

Refugees. Originally founded by AID, this program attempted to provide sustenance and relocation for those whose homes had been disrupted during the fighting and who desired freedom from communist control.

Psychological Operations. This was a program supported by two agencies, MACV and USIS, under the auspices of the Joint Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO). The program was responsible for advising the South Vietnamese public of the other GVN programs in effect (to include Phoenix) and persuading the populace to withstand communist influence.

U.S. Forces Civic Action/Civil Affairs (MACV).²²

Furthermore, CORDS replaced other AID pacification-related programs "such as rural electrification, hamlet schools, rural health, village-hamlet administration training, agricultural affairs, and public works." Consequently, the CORDS program, under Ambassador Komer's dynamic leadership, represented an organization with an institutional vested interest in the pacification efforts. Never before had a single organization existed to receive the "credit or blame for pacification

results." Now the U.S. effort was much more focused, combining the results of each subordinate program into what Ambassador Komer called "a major cumulative effect."⁴³

With this view of the CORDS organization in mind, what was its performance record in South Vietnam? To answer that question, we need to study how it executed its subordinate programs and specifically how it sequenced and linked these programs or major operations together during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Ambassador Komer rightly understood the need to attack the Viet Cong's infrastructure which was the insurgency's center of gravity. This infrastructure could be attacked either directly or indirectly. The direct approach concentrated on the arrest and isolation of VCI cadre personnel. The indirect approach employed the quality-of-life improvements to raise local living standards in the rural areas, thereby undercutting the insurgents' prestige and reason for existence. The VCI was the insurgents' focal point concerning their legitimacy, financial and logistical sustainment, and manpower pool. Disrupting or destroying this entity would preclude the insurgency from functioning within the hamlets of South Vietnam. Before this could occur, however, the security forces needed renewed attention to improve both their quality and quantity.

Project Takeoff, which was Ambassador Komer's plan regarding the linkage and phasing of the security effort with the attack on the VCI, was implemented in early 1968. His goals with this project were directed toward:

[refining] pacification planning, accelerating the Chieu Hoi program . . . mounting the new attack on the VC infrastructure, expanding and improving the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces support for pacification--especially the RF/PF--expanding the Revolutionary Development effort, stepping up aid to the mounting numbers of refugees, revamping and strengthening of the police and land reform.¹⁴

Nevertheless, before this ambitious project could have a reasonable chance for success, Ambassador Komer and the GVN launched a major operation modernizing and retraining the indigenous security forces.

Having received responsibility from MACV for the "support, advice and training of ARVN's paramilitary auxiliaries" comprised of the Regional and Popular Forces plus the Peoples Self Defense Forces, CORDS set out immediately to upgrade these overlooked rural units found at the province, district, hamlet, and village levels. Within two years, the Regional and Popular forces had grown to 500,000 men while the Peoples Self Defense Forces increased to 4 million men. Weapons were also enhanced with the M-16, replacing older World War II rifles. In addition, these paramilitary forces were retrained by the CORDS mobile advisory teams.¹⁵

The permanent security blanket or shield provided by

the paramilitary forces developed as a result of the tactical engagements and almost continuous presence of these forces at the lowest level of rural Vietnamese life. Thus, this security effort or major operation employing large numbers of paramilitary forces operating in many small units over an extended period of time subsequently protected those who ventured into the hamlets and villages who would actually administer the pacification or quality of life programs. In other words, one major operation was sequenced to provide for the success of a subsequent major operation.

Another one of these major operations within CORDS was the controversial Phoenix program. This operation was named after "Phung Hoang", the Vietnamese translation for "all seeing bird", and was aimed principally at the VCI. It was based primarily on the writings of the noted British expert on counterinsurgency, Sir Robert Thompson who claimed that any effort "which ignored the enemy infrastructure was doomed to failure in the long run because the "dedicated Communist cadre gave the enemy his staying power, his ability to adapt to new conditions, to regenerate his strength, and to stay the course of a 'protracted war'." Based upon his experience in Malaya, he further stated that the threat "could not finally be disposed of while the VCI survived intact."

CORDS officials also recognized this threat and

pressed for a renewed and "long overdue attack on the VCI." By 16 June 1967 Ambassador Komer organized the Intelligence Collection and Exploitation program (ICEX) to coordinate and streamline both U.S. and GVN intelligence gathering and subsequent actions against the infrastructure. ICEX, which later became known as Phoenix, identified and corrected several organizational problems such as civilian detention and the "action programs" that exploited intelligence previously gathered. Civilian detention demanded immediate attention because the GVN did not possess an adequate physical plant necessary for either holding, processing, or imprisoning civilian detainees. Some detainees, for example, were released almost immediately after apprehension. Additional detention areas were subsequently constructed to preclude this practice.²⁷

The other problem that ICEX rectified was the manner in which intelligence was exploited, specifically how suspected VCI personnel were targeted. By strictly defining exactly who was considered part of the infrastructure, the program adopted a "rifle shot" rather than a "shot gun" approach. For instance, the definition explicitly identified those enemy personnel the ICEX or Phoenix program sought to isolate.

The Viet Cong Infrastructure is all Viet Cong political and administrative organizations established by the Communist Party which goes under the name People's Revolutionary Party,

from the cities to the countryside. The Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN) is the highest level steering organ of the Viet Cong in South Vietnam, which directs these political and administrative organizations through the various echelons of the People's Revolutionary Party of South Vietnam, and the Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLFSVN), from central level down to the hamlets.

In addition the communists plant a number of caures to direct and control other parties and organizations, such as the Progressive Socialist Party, the Southern Democratic Party, the Alliance of National Democratic and Peace Forces or other similar organizations in the future. Only these communist cadres are regarded as part of the Viet Cong Infrastructure.

Viet Cong military units, members of mass organizations established by the Viet Cong, citizens forced to perform as laborers, or civilians living in areas temporarily controlled by the Viet Cong, are not classified as belonging to the Viet Cong Infrastructure.¹²

Therefore, by selectively identifying and apprehending only the key political leaders and activists within the infrastructure, the program reduced the number of relatively unimportant "numbers of low level agents or members of Viet Cong Infrastructure Front organizations" in the GVN detention system.¹³

Not surprisingly, the 1968 TET offensive further galvanized GVN support for the Phoenix program. Only through this approach, the GVN rightfully believed, could their various intelligence networks coordinate to provide the required warning preventing future surprises.

Accordingly, President Nguyen Van Thieu decreed on 1 July

1968 that the Phoenix program was "to direct, control and coordinate all national efforts toward wiping out the Viet Cong Infrastructure."³⁰

Although the Phoenix operation received much unfavorable criticism from the U.S. media and anti-war activists during its brief life span, at least one U.S. Vietnam War historian, Stanley Karnow, agrees with former CORDS and CIA Director William E. Colby's assessment that the program was a success. Initially a critic of Phoenix, Mr. Karnow reversed his views after extensively interviewing several Viet Cong leaders after the war. Consequently, Mr. Colby's claim "that during the four years that the program operated, the Vietnamese government with our support, did defeat the whole enemy guerrilla effort" and that "some sixty thousand authentic Viet Cong agents" were eliminated is substantiated by Mr. Karnow's research. For instance, two senior officers, Colonel Bui Tin and General Tran Do, reported that the program was "destructive" costing "the loss of thousands of our cadres." Madame Nguyen Thi Dinh, another Viet Cong leader, explained that "we never feared a division of troops, but the infiltration of a couple of guys into our ranks created tremendous difficulties for us." Finally, Nguyen Co Thach, the foreign minister after 1975, complained that the program "wiped out many of our bases" forcing many North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops

into Cambodia.³¹

Less than a year after TET, as the Phoenix program's systematic identification and elimination of VCI personnel gained momentum, CORDS officials initiated yet another major operation. In late 1968, Ambassador Komer unveiled the Accelerated Pacification Effort (APE) "to recover lost ground and exploit the TET-generated enemy weaknesses in the countryside." Accepting risk by reducing security force and Revolutionary Development team sizes to quickly form additional teams, the new program sought to establish a GVN "presence in as many villages as possible." Rapidly regaining control of pre-TET population areas against little opposition, the APE then began penetrating areas previously denied to the GVN. Based upon this promising success by efficiently filling the vacuum left by the VCI, CORDS officials extended the program's original three-month contract. This extension consequently allowed the APE to take full advantage of President Thieu's and the GVN's now totally sincere interest in the pacification effort.³²

President Thieu's personal commitment through appearances in villages and training camps provided a vital yet previously missing element in the pacification effort -- "Vietnam initiative and convinced leadership at the highest levels." Now the effort became exactly what it was originally designed to accomplish, which was a

Vietnamese program supported by U.S. advisors and material resources.³³

Consequently, in 1969 and 1970 the APE, through GVN initiatives and influence, reorganized rural governments through village elections, subsequently granting greater autonomy to those elected officials. In addition, it established a local self-help fund administered by the village council. Furthermore, the APE implemented a far-reaching land reform policy that also fell under the purview of the village leadership. Finally, agricultural and economic improvements sponsored through the APE took the form of the allocation of the improved rice strains, IR5 and IR8, plus many road and inland canal reopenings. As a result of these initiatives, rural prosperity became more and more visible during the early 1970s. Thus, the APE, while originally intended as a short-term response to exploit VCI weaknesses, actually resulted in a combination of nationwide rural programs that produced Ambassador Komer's major cumulative effect.³⁴

Now that we have reviewed the CORDS program's development, organization and implementation, what were the overall effects in the countryside as a result of these series of major operations? Based upon the previously noted views of Mr. Colby and Karnow, the U.S. and the GVN practically eliminated the insurgency by 1972. Understandably, Mr. Colby's only complaint was

that the U.S. took too much time to organize its CORDS response and that if it had been initiated just one or two years earlier the entire outcome in Vietnam may have been different. In fact, he called CORDS "a winning combination that came too late" insisting that U.S. war weariness and adverse media coverage would have been precluded with an earlier victory in the countryside.³⁵

Others agree with these positive assessments. Douglas S. Blaufarb, author of The Counter-Insurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance 1950 to the Present, states that "by 1970 a considerable measure of security had been restored and the ability of the insurgency to affect events, to mobilize the population, to fight, tax, and recruit had been eroded to the point where it was a manageable threat." He further comments that while the VCI was never completely "dismantled or destroyed", those in the countryside "had substantially abandoned the VC cause which . . . in the very same villages where once it had held on despite the overwhelming strength of its enemies, [and] had now lost the 'mandate of heaven'." Finally, Blaufarb stated that "the war was conventionalized to a considerable degree in that the political link between the enemy and the population withered away, and forces which were largely foreign to the area conducted operations which more and more resembled incursions from the outside."³⁶ Additional

concurrence is offered by editors W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell of The Lessons of Vietnam when they state that "there is a great irony in the fact that the North Vietnamese finally won by purely conventional means . . . the argument in this book convinces us that we won the unconventional war in that the South Vietnamese and American joint (sic) effort had largely eliminated the Viet Cong as a serious contender for power by 1972."³⁷

Thus, in its simplest terms, the CORDS program under strong U.S. leadership combined a series of major operations comprising a diverse array of tactical level actions to attain its desired goals. The question now is does this program constitute an operational approach to unconventional warfare? To determine whether such a relationship exists, we now focus our attention on the operational issues relating to the CORDS program's leadership, planning, execution, and inherent flexibility or maneuver.

IV. Operational Issues

In his role as both the Special Assistant to the President and later as the Deputy Director for CORDS, Ambassador Komer exercised power and influence at the highest levels of national government. While in Washington, he directly affected the CORDS program's early development and organization and subsequently while

in Saigon he commanded a pacification effort that eventually numbered over 260,000 paramilitary personnel. He was the single official who presided over the entire advisory staff which supervised "the programs [that] reached down ... into the rural heartland, conducting activities in many of the 12,000 hamlets which were the frontline of the war." He was the man most responsible for creating and operating CORDS, the program that alone accepted the responsibility for pacification's success or failure. Through his leadership, he organized the "dispersed and disparate group of programs into a unified management structure disposing of some sixty-five hundred people, military and civilian, and an initial budget of almost \$500 million in U.S. funds together with many billions in U.S. owned piasters and GVN appropriations." ³⁸

With FM 100-5 (Operations) designating the corps as the largest unit operating in the tactical realm, the CORDS program and Ambassador Komer were, by inference, performing at the operational level. Thus, the four subordinate regional CORDS advisors plus the other lower level advisors at province and district levels can be represented as the participants involved in the tactical matters. Based therefore on Ambassador Komer's wide and deep span of control, his innate ability to influence action, the sheer magnitude of his nationwide effort, and the doctrinal designation of the operational level of

war, he should be considered an excellent example of an operational leader. His imprint on all CORDS matters was unmistakable just as was his role in developing and controlling the overall campaign in the countryside."

Next, we will look at operational planning, which according to Mr. James Schneider's Theoretical Paper No. 3, relates to "the process of establishing a fine balance among ends, ways and means and risk." In the CORDS pacification campaign, planners sought by the ways of several major operations to achieve the desired end state by attacking and defeating the enemy with both violent and non-violent means. The ways consisted of the security force improvements and their subsequent tactical actions, the Phoenix program's actions against the VCI, and the APE accomplishments to maintain the post-TET initiative. Each major operation contributed to the campaign's eventual success. The success of any single major operation would not necessarily establish victory for the campaign. Success in all three was therefore critical.

The means employed were the tactical level actions of the security forces and civilian pacification teams. These groups conducted the major operations listed above. Balancing the mixture of each group was based upon a location's internal political situation in relation to the insurgency. In a sense, then, one could argue that

these means were a competitive strategy to dau tranh.

The acceptance of risk varied throughout the campaign. Initially, risk was not generally accepted out of fears that pacification teams might suffer from unchecked enemy forces. Subsequently, the security teams reduced the enemy's military presence in the countryside allowing pacification efforts to evolve without significant risk. During the APE, however, significant risk was accepted as security teams were reduced in size to create additional teams of similar size. The enemy situation was not completely known, yet CORDS planners wanted to exploit the momentum provided by TET.

The CORDS program's goals of providing rural security, disrupting and reducing the VCI's influence, reducing its presence and improving quality of life conditions in the countryside were attained certainly by 1972 through the ways and means just described. In addition, these goals supported the U.S. strategic end state which by that time were focused on President Richard Nixon's Vietnamization policy. Thus, by contributing to the strategic end state, the CORDS operational goal satisfies Mr. Schneider's requirement that "an operational end is considered suitable only to the extent that its effect or outcome contributes to the attainment of the strategic end."⁴⁰

Finally, an analysis of the pacification efforts'

cost reveals that it never amounted to more than 3 percent of the "shooting war's" approximate \$30 billion annual expenses. Even during 1970, "the peak year for U.S. support for pacification, the costs totalled \$730 million." In view of the results achieved, the CORDS program was a bargain in comparison with conventional war costs. Or, to paraphrase Mr. Schneider's remarks on the efficient allocation of means, the allocation of ends and means was proportional.⁴¹

Turning now to an evaluation of how the CORDS program was executed, it would again prove useful to refer to Mr. Schneider who has stated that "the hallmark of operational art is the integration of temporally and spatially distributed operations into one coherent whole." He continues with "simultaneous and successive operations are in fact the heart of operational art." Thus, widely distributed forces acting throughout the entire theater of operations characterize simultaneous operations while successive operations are those dependent upon the conclusion of other ongoing ones. With these concepts in mind, does a relationship exist between operational art and the manner in which CORDS was executed? In other words, within the context of CORDS how does that series of three major operations relate to Mr. Schneider's definition of operational art?⁴²

As previously described in this study, the CORDS

program was an integrated, multi-faceted agency that maintained sole responsibility for the success or failure of the U.S. advisory effort regarding pacification. Its control extended downward from the national headquarters in Saigon to each of the 4 regions, 44 provinces, 250 districts, and over 10,000 hamlets throughout the theater of operations. In addition, its assigned charter brought many diverse and important programs together under its exclusive purview. Quite clearly then, the ongoing activities in the countryside were simultaneous in nature and part of Ambassador Komer's overall design whereby "no one plan . . . would itself be decisive. But together they could hope to have a major cumulative effect."⁴³ Not surprisingly then, the ambassador's major cumulative effect was very much dependent upon the outcome of these numerous concurrent yet sometimes widely separated actions.

To highlight the successive nature of the CORDS program's execution, one could argue that Ambassador Komer sequenced the major operations. To begin with, he originally desired to launch Project Takeoff as soon as possible but realized that the Regional and Popular Forces required immediate augmentation in areas such as manpower allocations, training, and weapons enhancements. Thus, the security effort received first priority throughout the countryside in order to prepare the

hamlets and villages for the pacification teams. As experience had shown, rural pacification establishing quality of life programs and re-instituting a local GVN infrastructure would not attain lasting results unless a continuous security force was in place.

The next major operation continued pacification while emphasizing the Phoenix project to target the enemy's unconventional center of gravity, the VCI. The TET offensive highlighted the need for the coordinated intelligence system within Phoenix to predict or preclude the occurrence of future surprise attacks and to concentrate on the VCI that had surfaced during the uprising. Finally, Ambassador Komer launched the APE to exploit the vacuum left in the countryside by the VCI who were lost during the TET military operations and successful Phoenix actions. The ambassador continued this last major operation until the VCI's influence was practically negated. In short, the CORDS leadership seems to have structured and conducted its actions in the countryside in a manner similar to the one offered by Mr. Schneider's "simultaneous and successive" representation of operational art.

The last operational issue relating to the CORDS program was its inherent flexibility in dealing with the insurgency. This flexibility arose out of the innovative approaches CORDS adopted, such as its "unique civil-

military advisory organizations," its focus on sustained territorial security, the Phoenix actions against the VCI, and the APE. According to Ambassador Komer, these innovative programs "represented flexible attempts to find answers to the special problems of Vietnam." Furthermore, this flexibility and innovation arose because CORDS was new and different and consequently unburdened by bureaucratic impediments. Concerning this point, the ambassador writes that "CORDS was a wartime expedient, designed exclusively for Vietnam. We wrote the field manual as we went along." Another reason for its flexibility was the high ranking support the program received from both U.S. and GVN presidents. Finally, the CORDS program represented an institutional vested interest in the pacification effort. This responsibility was perhaps the most telling reason why such creative solutions to the insurgency appeared.⁴⁴

Ambassador Komer summarized his thoughts on the CORDS program's ability to adapt to the insurgents' actions by stating that:

Perhaps the chief organizational lesson that we learned from Vietnam is the limited capability of conventional government machinery (both U.S. and local) for coping flexibly with unconventional insurgency problems. Unified management of political, military and economic conflict will produce the best results, both where policy is made and in the field. Where major active insurgencies must be dealt with, special ad hoc machinery to cope with it probably should be set up early in the day. Should local capabilities prove so inadequate

that major U.S. support is given (even without U.S. intervention), some kind of combined management machinery may be essential, and be justified by the major U.S. contribution. We need to learn more about this variant of coalition warfare, which requires a more ideal relationship between helper and helped.⁴⁵

At this point in the analysis, though, can we equate this flexibility with operational maneuver? Apparently not, because today's FM 100-5 definition states that "effective operational maneuver requires the anticipation of friendly and enemy actions well beyond the current battle, the careful coordination of tactical and logistical activities, and the movement of large formations to great depths" [emphasis added]. Therefore, by today's definition, operational maneuver cannot occur in unconventional warfare when security forces operate in relatively small numbers remaining tied to one geographical area.⁴⁶

And yet, in a sense, maneuver did occur within the pacification effort. For example, the security forces, on a nationwide basis "maneuvered" the Vietcong away from the hamlets and villages while the Phoenix program penetrated or "maneuvered" into the VCI cells. In addition, the various pacification programs attempted to "out maneuver" the VCI for the allegiance of the rural population. Perhaps these examples suggest that maneuver can exist in domains other than the physical one or that

relational considerations are not limited to the physical placement of units. Thus, the issue remains somewhat cloudy regarding the existence of operational maneuver during the execution of the CORDS program.

V. Conclusions

The purpose of this monograph was to examine the CORDS program in order to determine if it represented an operational approach to a counterinsurgency campaign. Of particular interest to this study was whether the program sequenced its major operations combining their "cumulative effects" into one complete whole aimed toward the strategic goal.

To accomplish this inquiry, the study first briefly reviewed some political realities that will affect our future responses in the Third World. Perhaps the most notable reality was the nature of our potential adversary's strategy which called for a combination of political as well as military strategies. Next, we reviewed, in detail, the CORDS program's historical development, organization, and implementation. Finally, we analyzed the program's relationship with several operational issues.

As a result of this inquiry, one can see the CORDS program's linkage with operational art. This linkage is apparent in several aspects of the program that are

associated with operational practices, such as operational leadership, planning, and execution. The operational leader guiding the program was obviously Ambassador Komer who served as the program's principle architect, leading advocate, and foremost director. We observed operational planning in the manner by which the program combined ways, means, and risk to attain the ends. Also, the program was operationally executed through the use of simultaneous and successive operations. Finally, although some sort of "maneuver" existed throughout the execution of CORDS, current doctrinal definitions do not allow us to equate the program's inherent flexibility with operational maneuver.

Another aspect of the CORDS program that pertains to operational art was the way the program sequenced its tactical actions contributing their outputs toward the strategic end state. These tactical actions took the form of major operations that Ambassador Komer knowingly arranged in order to derive the maximum benefit.

Although not directly related to an operational issue, the CORDS program appears to offer an answer to the dau tranh strategy that our potential adversary may employ. The CORDS program's uniquely designed organizational structure synthesizing military and civilian pacification efforts contains the flexibility required to cope with the similarly constructed insurgent

strategy. Ambassador Komer aptly addresses this point when he states that, "Our experience with pacification . . . suggests that we can adapt flexibly to atypical needs, however late and however inefficiently, and that if we had done earlier and better what we now see more clearly, Vietnam might not have proved so tragically intractable."⁴⁷

In hindsight, the CORDS program did provide, to a large extent, the desired results in the rural areas. Admittedly, though, the enemy's TET offensive certainly contributed to the subsequent success enjoyed by the Phoenix operation and, hence, to the CORDS program. Nevertheless, U.S. policymakers must be credited with having the CORDS machinery available to quickly and relentlessly capitalize on the enemy's mistakes and misconceptions. Perhaps the greatest mistake we could make, as our collective memories of Vietnam fade with time, would be to forget the valuable lessons accrued from the CORDS program. This unparalleled experiment in counterinsurgency warfare must be firmly retained in our institutional memories.

In sum, this monograph has shown the usefulness of a counterinsurgency strategy which employs operational concepts. But as Colonel Charles M. Simpson, III, USA (Ret.), points out in his book Inside the Green Berets: The First Thirty Years, "in theory, the aid will be used

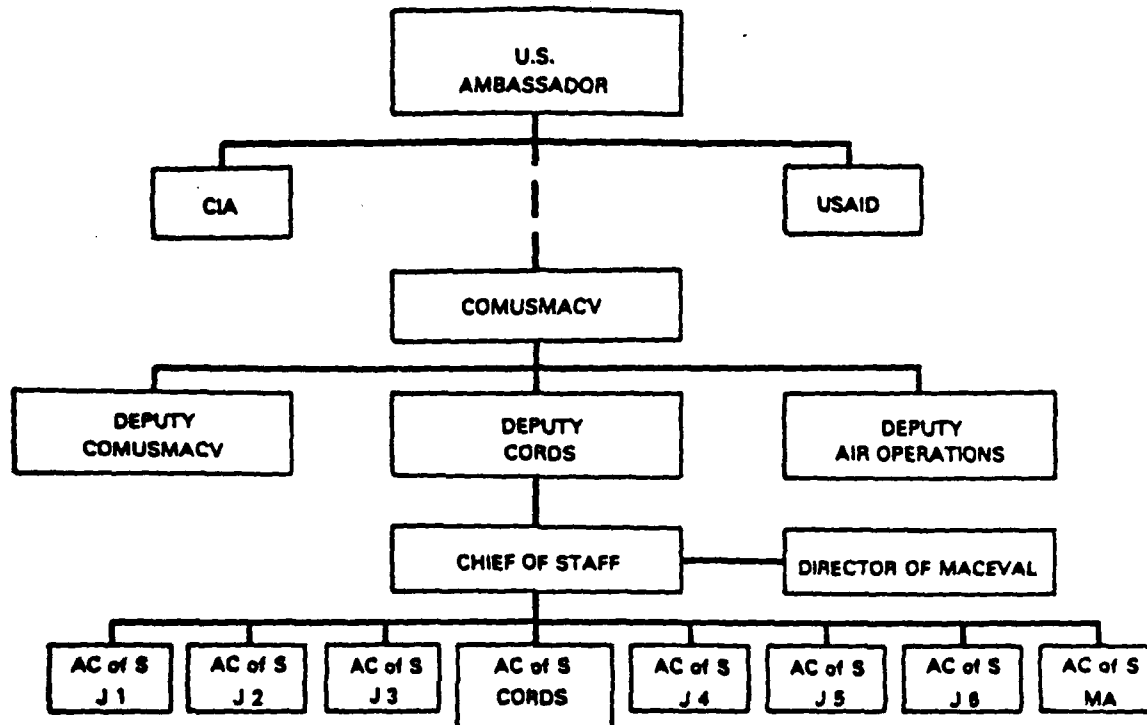
correctly, and the advice will be heeded. Needed reforms will be undertaken, the citizenry will find new hope, and the insurgent and his infrastructure will be correctly identified and properly neutralized." Unfortunately, he continues, it seldom works that way in reality.

"Indigenous military commanders all too often see little need for restraint or concern for the peasantry. Wealthy landowners defy attempts to break up their holdings or dilute their power. Local political leaders are interested in their own survival, and reform looks like a more chancy course than repression, particularly if the armed forces are in the politicians' control."

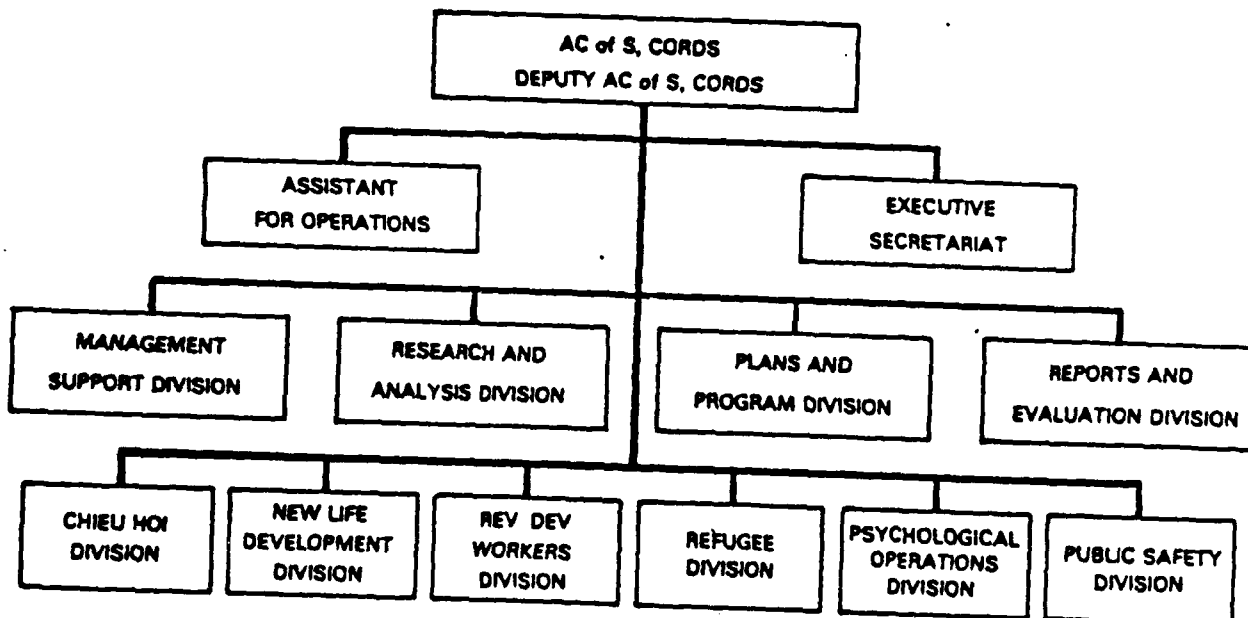
Nevertheless, today's political realities demand our continued participation in the Third World. Only with a counterinsurgency doctrine based on operational concepts can we successfully participate in regional conflicts that affect our national interests and security.⁴⁵

APPENDIX A

- STRUCTURE OF U.S. MISSION. SHOWING POSITION OF CORDS: MAY 67



- ORGANIZATION OF ASSISTANT CHIEF OF STAFF FOR CORDS



ENDNOTES

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34. Ibid., p. 266.
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41. Ibid., p. 17; McCollum, p. 116.
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